LD 1978 "An Act to Enact the Reentry Success and Earned Time Act"

January 17, 2024

Good morning, Senator Beebe-Center , Representative Sailsbury and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Rae Sage, and I am the Policy Coordinator for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. The Permanent Commission's role is to examine racial disparities across all systems and advise Maine State Government on ways to improve the status and outcomes of historically disadvantaged racial, Indigenous, and tribal populations.

I am here today to give testimony in support of the policy goals of LD 1978 and all that it may do to advance and incentivize re-entry success for those navigating incarceration. The offering of education, trade work, and job skills programming helps bridge the gap between life as an incarcerated person and life as a free citizen.

Maine currently ranks 44th out of 50 states for Black-White disparity in state prisons, with our state prisons housing severely disproportionate rates of Black (9 times) and Indigenous (6 times) people compared with the state's population.[1] Additionally, Maine's female prison population increased more than 50% between 2014 and 2019.[2]

In our engagement with the Maine State Prison chapter of the NAACP, we heard that significant advancements have been made in offering programming to support re-entry. We wish to acknowledge the progress that the Department of Corrections has made in increasing opportunities for positive programming to support rehabilitation and re-entry.

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[1] Prison Policy Institute. Maine Profile. Available at: https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/ME.html

[2] Council of State Governments. (2001). "Justice Reinvestment in Maine: Improving Supervision and Data Collection. https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/JR-Maine-Policy-Framework_FINAL.pdf

We also heard from residents there are opportunities to continue this positive progress and make additional improvements, specifically around:

- offering residents with long sentences incentives to engage with programming early in their sentence (rather than waiting until the last year),
- ensuring there is sufficient programming available to avoid waitlists[3],
- having programming to meet the specific needs of incarcerated women,
- ensuring there are sufficient spaces available in minimum security facilities for those who have successfully engaged with programming to allow for a stepped approach to re-entry.

Those with long sentences can, at times, see little reason to participate until the last years of their sentencing, if at all. Making sure incarcerated people are equipped with the skills needed to successfully reintegrate into their communities is of benefit to us all. Understanding the barriers to engagement by those who opt out will allow for long-term solutions to be developed to promote engagement with rehabilitation and re-entry programming, which will ultimately benefit all of Maine's communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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[3] Monthly waitlist data is published by the DoC. For example, see page 10 of the December 2023 report. https://www.maine.gov/corrections/sites/maine.gov.corrections/files/inline-files/December%202023%20Monthly%20Adult%20Data%20Report.pdf